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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Beyond market dependence: The origins of capitalism in Catalonia

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**Abstract**

Buried in the footnotes of his famous 1976 essay, Robert Brenner left the remark that Catalonia had experienced an agrarian transition to capitalism in parallel to England. This important claim has been completely forgotten by his followers of the political Marxist tradition, who since then have developed his views on the origins of capitalism. Building on the specialist literature, this article revisits the question of the Catalan transition through the prism of political Marxism and teases out its implications. In particular, it argues that the Catalan case illustrates the centrality of agency and subjectivity in the process of capitalist change. Contrary to Brenner's claim, this paper will argue that pre-capitalist social property relations persisted in agriculture throughout the period of transition. Instead, the region's capitalist breakthrough was prompted by sociocultural struggles in its 18th-century proto-industry.

**KEYWORDS**

Catalonia, political Marxism, proto-industry, transition debate

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the 18th century, Catalonia, a region in the north-east corner of the Iberian Peninsula, witnessed the rise of a powerful commercial agriculture and a dynamic textile industry that was described by contemporaries as “a little England in the heart of Spain” (Pollard, 1981). A pattern of development without parallel in the Mediterranean Basin, the dynamism of this economic formation allowed Catalonia to prevail over competing industrial regions and

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consolidate itself as the undisputed industrial powerhouse of Spain by the early decades of the 19th century (Thomson, 2005). By the later decades of that century, the region concentrated the practical totality of Spain's cotton industry and approached the levels of cotton yarn production of France or Germany (Torras, 1998).

Buried in the footnotes of his famous essay on the English origins of capitalism, Brenner (1976, pp. 63–64) left the passing remark that Catalonia had experienced an agrarian transition to capitalism in parallel to England. For Brenner, Catalonia's economic divergence harked all the way back to the early 16th century, when the abolition of serfdom would have set in motion a long-term process of agrarian growth built upon an English-style pattern of large-scale farming. Brenner's view, however, was founded upon a number of empirical inaccuracies that were soon pointed out by Torras (1980), who noted that agrarian growth of the sort identified by Brenner would only arrive much later and was driven by small family farms rather than English-style *engrossed* farms. Such a decisive rebuttal brought to an end the "Brenner Debate" in Catalan historiography even before it began elsewhere (Aston & Philpin, 1985). After three decades of disregard, Brenner's theories on the origin of capitalism have been recently reclaimed by Marfany (2012) in a book-length study. Revising Brenner's account to address its empirical shortcomings, Marfany has redeployed his concept of *market dependence*—the structural reliance upon market exchange for social reproduction—to track the emergence of capitalist social relations in the pluriactive peasant households of 18th century Catalonia.

Marfany's work brings a long overdue reappraisal of Brenner's ideas in Catalan historiography; however, it does not address the evolution of Brenner's own thought as well as the development of his theories by his political Marxist followers. In a 2001 article in this journal, Robert Brenner identified another early agrarian transition in the market-dependent family farms of the Netherlands. This marked a sharp departure from his initial thesis, which envisioned large-scale commercial farming as the singular source of capitalist mutation, and opened a fertile debate among his followers. Brenner's work on the Dutch transition prompted a schism with political theorist Wood (2002b), who came to reject the usefulness of the concept of market dependence to track the genesis of capitalist development, and instead proposed a theorization of the origins of capitalism that focused on the emergence of *market imperatives*—the competitive pressures to systematically improve the production process—highlighting the creative agency of social actors in the process of transition.

To be sure, the neglect of Catalan historiography has been reciprocated by the political Marxist tradition, which appears to have entirely forgotten about Brenner's early suggestion of a parallel genesis of capitalism in England and Catalonia. This article seeks to pick up where the Brenner–Wood debate left off and extend the discussion to the Catalan case. Building upon Wood's analysis, it will be argued that the Catalan experience illustrates how structural criteria, such as market dependence, remain insufficient to explain the capitalist breakthrough. In Catalonia, the prime mover of the transition was sociocultural struggles around production and labour, agencies that remained relatively autonomous from the pressures of "objective economic forces." Building on this perspective, the article proposes a reformulation of the problem of the origins of capitalism around the social construction of capitalist imperatives.

The paper is divided into two parts, each split into three sections. The first part is dedicated to theoretical issues around the origins of capitalism. The opening section (2.1) provides some background to the Brenner thesis and to the theoretical outlook of political Marxism. Section 2.2 addresses the Brenner–Wood debate on the Netherlands and unpacks the limitations of the concept of market dependence. Section 2.3 explores some useful theoretical avenues to better capture the agency and subjectivity of the social actors involved in the process of transition. The second part of the paper delves into the Catalan case in order to illustrate these theoretical points. Section 3.1 will address the limitations of Brenner's account of a Catalan agrarian transition as well as of Marfany's revision through the prism of market dependence. Contrary to these authors' claims, it is argued that pre-capitalist social property relations persisted in agriculture throughout the period of transition. Section 3.2 examines why in recent decades the specialist literature has increasingly linked the region's economic take-off to the spread of domestic forms of manufacturing or "proto-industry." Section 3.3 explores the origins of this proto-industrial dynamism, tracing it to sociocultural struggles to revolutionize the organization and orientation of production in the region's hinterlands, focusing on the localities of Terrassa, Igualada, Manresa, and Sabadell.

## 2 | POLITICAL MARXISM BEYOND MARKET DEPENDENCE

### 2.1 | The Brenner thesis and political Marxism

Political Marxism arose as a distinct approach to the question of the origins of capitalism in the 1980s, in the context of the debate around the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Central to its research framework was Robert Brenner's famous thesis of how this passage took place and Ellen Meiksins Wood's theorization of its implications.

In a series of highly debated articles, Robert Brenner challenged the dominant perspectives on the transition to capitalism (Brenner, 1976, 1977, 1985). Since the 1950s, the question had been framed around whether the dissolution of feudalism was driven by either endogenous factors—the internal contradictions of the feudal agrarian economy—or exogenous factors—the commercial forces radiating from intensifying long-distance trade in the towns. Brenner reformulated this antinomy as a problem of structural and political determinants, challenging his predecessors for their excessive focus on the former. Against proponents of the idea that capitalism came with an increase in long-distance trade (the *commercialization model*), like Paul Sweezy or Immanuel Wallerstein, he argued that there was no reason to assume that an expansion of commercial exchange would have automatically undermined feudal institutions, as the emergence of a European grain market saw the reinforcement of serfdom in the East (Brenner, 1976). Against proponents of the idea that feudalism declined on the back of shifts in social relations propitiated by cycles of population growth (the *demographic model*), he pointed that the same demographic pressures had led to divergent outcomes across the continent (Brenner, 1976, 1985).

Instead, Brenner asserted the primacy of the political. Deploying a comparative analysis of the late-feudal shifts in different European agricultures, he reached the conclusion that the most determinant factor in capitalist transformation was not raw structural pressures (objective economic forces) but the different social struggles that arose over them and the crystallization of their outcomes in what he termed *social property relations*, the legal and political forms that mediate relations of property and domination (Brenner, 1976). It was the layering of these settlements, as well as the long-term histories of class formation that preceded them, that determined the different passages that European societies took out of feudalism. In Eastern Europe, where the feudal aristocracy succeeded in retrenching its physical domination over the workforce, serfdom experienced a revival. In France, where an absolutist state capable of circumventing the aristocracy in the taxation of the peasantry had emerged, the bureaucracy ensured the grip of smallholders over the land and insulated agriculture from market pressures. In England, where these struggles resulted in the immersion of the peasantry under dynamics of market competition for access to the land, a high degree of market dependence set in motion a train of self-reinforcing imperatives towards the maximization of profit as a means for subsistence. Agricultural producers entered a logic unprecedented in human history: a permanent compulsion towards productive specialization, intensification, and innovation. It is here, in the regime of the English enclosure, where Brenner first situated the birth of capitalist social relations.

The Brenner thesis, as it became known, detonated a wide debate and stirred a considerable backlash from orthodox Marxists, who dismissed his neglect of structural laws of causation as a “political” Marxism; a label that Brenner's followers gladly embraced (Aston & Philpin, 1985; Wood, 1981, p. 76). It was Ellen Meiksins Wood who fleshed out the theoretical implications of the Brenner thesis into a distinct project of socio-historical research under this label. Criticizing all-encompassing ontologies of capitalism for their tendency “to disguise its distinctiveness as a historically specific social form with a beginning and, potentially, an end,” her work always stressed the importance of carving out fine-grained accounts of the specificity of capitalist institutions (Wood, 2002a, p. 74).

Central to her definition of capitalism was her theory of its unique *separation of the economic and the political* into different legal spheres. Following Brenner's historical observations, she theorized that the capitalist drive towards a permanent intensification of the labour process was a consequence of the detachment of economic accumulation from forms of *politically constituted property*. Unlike feudal land-rent extraction or absolutist tax farming, where appropriators relied on *extra-economic means* to squeeze producers further, the lack of direct coercive means available to the capitalist class meant that the response to falling profitability could only be one of intensified competition

and productive innovation. This twist transformed all previous forms of market interaction into the specific form of the capitalist market, where economic actors are systematically pressured to compete in order to ensure their most basic social reproduction. However, Wood insisted that the separation is only real insofar it is a legal construct and that the dynamics of the economy “itself [exist] in the shape of social, juridical, and political forms—in particular, forms of property and domination” (Wood, 1981, p. 69). Methodologically, this has profound implications for Marxist historiography, as it implies that we should be able to trace the relation between base and superstructure “without great conceptual leaps because they do not represent two essentially different and discontinuous orders of reality” (Wood, 1981, p. 78). From this perspective, the capitalist market is a social construct that is being permanently constituted at the level of superstructural contestation.

## 2.2 | The ambiguity of market dependence

One of Brenner's strongest objections to his predecessors was that the assumption that capitalism emerged out of an outgrowth of market exchange failed to draw a clear distinction between pre-capitalist and capitalist markets (Brenner, 1977). This blurred the historical specificity of capitalism and muddled the question of a “transition” altogether, because instances of capitalist accumulation could have been occurring since time immemorial. To avoid this transhistorical slippage, political Marxist theory draws an important distinction between age-old *market opportunities*, which constitute mere conjunctures for profit-making via market exchange, and specifically capitalist market imperatives, which refer to the pressures to systematically improve the productivity of labour. The Brenner thesis identified the historical emergence of such imperatives in the English peasantry's dependence on commercial leases for access to the land, their most basic means of subsistence. This associated capitalist social relations with contexts of market dependence: the necessity to engage in market exchange in order to reproduce one's social position, be it through profit-making or the sale of labour power (Wood, 2002a, pp. 2–3).

However, the conflation of market dependence with market imperatives resulted in some problematic ambiguities that surfaced during the Brenner–Wood debate, which took place in this journal (Brenner, 2001; Post, 2002; Wood, 2002b). The source of the dispute was Brenner's claim that, for reasons different and in parallel to England, the agricultural producers of the northern Netherlands experienced an early capitalist transition in the 1600s (Brenner, 2001). The starting point was an environmental degradation of the countryside, which forced Dutch peasants to depend on the market for grain. This generated a context of market dependence for their most basic need to realize their social reproduction: food. In response, they were forced to produce commodities for exchange, focusing on cattle breeding and dairy farming for export. Eventually, with the help of urban finance and land reclamations, their market dependence would set in motion a train of specialization, investment, and productive improvement along similar lines to England.

Ellen Meiksins Wood parted ways with Brenner on this issue. She asserted that Brenner had relapsed into the kind of reasoning he once criticized: that an outgrowth of market relations detonated by objective economic forces (in this case, environmental degradation) was sufficient to account for a capitalist mutation (Wood, 2002b, pp. 54–55). In this process, much like the proponents of commercialization that preceded him, he had forgotten to elucidate whether the market had truly become imperative or not. In her revision of the case, she reached the conclusion that the Dutch peasantry, though indeed market dependent, continued to socially reproduce itself via pre-capitalist economic dynamics.

Her argument, which injected a dose of theoretical clarity into the often muddled discussions around pre-capitalist markets, can be summarized in the following four points (Wood, 2002b, pp. 52–59, 69–70): (a) The success of Dutch agriculture was based on the military and commercial prowess of its Republic and its merchants. As is usual of pre-capitalist trade, extra-economic institutions, such as monopolistic guilds and companies, ensured the realization of profits in advance, usually through the cornering markets or by exploiting a navy with superior transport capacities. In short, *profits were made in circulation by politically constituted means* and not in production by a need to relentlessly and systematically develop the productive forces. (b) *Market dependence in grain was not forcing an*

*intensification of the productive process*. The comparatively low prices of Baltic wheat and the pre-capitalist commercial sophistication of the Dutch Republic was enough to realize profits along the age-old practice of arbitrage: buying cheap and selling dear in different markets. (c) *Specialization*, which for Brenner is a crucial index of capitalist development, *has long existed in pre-capitalist economies without being driven by an impulse towards economic efficiency*. A quick example would be the massive conversion of arable fields into pastoral lands in late medieval Castile to exploit the opportunities of a lucrative wool market abroad (Anderson, 2013, p. 66). (d) In order to spot the emergence of capitalist rationalities, much more telling than the upward surge in an economic cycle is *the reaction of economic actors when this cycle is exhausted*. Only this allows us to track the existence of self-sustaining capitalist imperatives. In the Netherlands, investment in the production process soared when conditions for profit were good, but when agrarian prices collapsed across Europe in the mid-17th century, they retreated from productive innovation altogether; a dynamic, which Wood identifies as typical of pre-capitalist societies. By contrast, English agriculture had crossed a point of no return and displayed a new kind of price sensitivity. In the face of downturn, peasants reliant on the market for their access to the land could not simply withdraw from production, so they kept innovating their production methods to maximize profits. Failure to compete meant dispossession and the prospect of waged labour, migration, or starvation.

Market dependence might seem like an appropriate indicator of capitalist production when comparing serfdom and capitalist farming, but it runs into problems when dealing with the whole spectrum of commercial agricultures in between, including pre-capitalist social formations capable of a considerable market dynamism, like the Dutch or, as we shall see, the Catalan. This folds back on the criticism often levelled against the Brenner thesis: that it rests on a static portrayal of pre-capitalist agricultures that exaggerates the degree of self-subsistence of the pre-capitalist peasantry (Marfany, 2012, p. 7). The reality is that pre-industrial Europe witnessed the emergence of highly commercial and pluriactive peasantries that often specialized in production for the market and purchased their staples instead. These producers were not blasted into the market by outright dispossession but rather by a need to complement their incomes for subsistence; they were *semi-proletarians*. Like this, “by the end of the sixteenth century few parts of Europe remained autarkic ‘less developed economies’ engaging in subsistence production. Instead, Europe was turning into a differentiated patchwork of inter-dependent regions” (Ogilvie, 1996, p. 23).

The most important contribution of Wood's intervention was the recognition that market dependence is far from a sufficient condition to determine the emergence of capitalist imperatives. If market-dependent actors seize profitable opportunities with a more or less guaranteed return, then we can hardly speak of self-sustaining “imperatives.” To bridge dependence and imperatives, she argued, there needs to be a *competitive market* for the transmission of capitalist pressures. Though what this looks like can vary, she sketched a number of “irreducible conditions” for such competitive qualities to emerge (Wood, 2002b, p. 68): (a) the absence of politically constituted monopolies, like those secured by guild forms of production or colonial trading systems; (b) the potential for price competition between suppliers responding to the same conditions; (c) the reasonable access of supply and demand to one another so that price or cost pressures generate a need for cost-effective production; and (d) the existence of a common standard to measure value, whether monetary or some other compelling social average of labour costs.

## 2.3 | The social construction of market imperatives

Wood's focus on the “separation of the economic and the political” turns our attention to the forms of political change that allowed capitalist dynamics to appear by levelling the playing field of the market, such as the erosion of corporative structures or the unification of disjointed markets. Her approach echoes of Karl Polanyi's notion of “disembedding,” according to which the capitalist market was distilled from the removal of “non-economic” institutions (i.e., kinship, communal, religious, and political) that had previously arrested the emergence of economic competition (Polanyi, [1944] 2001). However, one problem remains in this formulation: Although the disembedding of the market may act as a structural precondition for the emergence of capitalist competition, there is no reason to assume that this will cause pre-capitalist dynamics to automatically wither away. Given the unprecedented nature of

capitalist rationalities, we should assume that pre-capitalist dynamics will tend to perpetuate themselves out of a certain cultural inertia unless challenged by a new economic culture; a process bound to prompt a clash between old and new subjectivities. In short, if we are not to relapse into an analysis that privileges objective economic forces, we ought to sharpen the focus upon the creative agency and subjectivity of the social actors enmeshed in the process of transition.

In the blind alleys of history, we find an 18th-century case that illustrates why the social construction of capitalist imperatives cannot be taken for granted. The case of the smallholders of Galicia, in Spain's north-west corner, reveals an example of market-dependent producers that ignored corporate regulations and yet did not set in motion a train of capitalist development (Torrás, 1998, pp. 81–82). As in Catalonia, the shrinkage of land plots below subsistence levels in this region forced the peasantry to resort to the market for their social reproduction. Many turned to selling their labour power in putting-out networks of cloth production for their export to Castilian markets, facing competition from other regional suppliers. The dispersed nature of their industry allowed them to avoid guild regulations altogether; the realm of production was “disembedded” from corporate oversight, and no one prevented them from innovating or accumulating more intensely. The region displayed a considerable advance at first and was compared by the Enlightenment thinker Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes (1723–1802) in 1774 as a worthy competitor of Catalonia's proto-industrial prowess. However, the atomization of production in pluriactive peasant households discouraged commercial middlemen and the dealers of the final product from intervening in the production process. In the meantime, peasant producers reproduced inefficient methods that had become culturally entrenched: an insistence to bleach the yarn on the middle of the production process rather than the finished piece relegated Galician cloths to the bottom range of quality. Sealed from competitive stimuli, capitalist rationalities failed to take hold, and Galicia's proto-industrial producers were eventually outpaced by the might of English and Catalan textiles in the early 19th century.

Despite her insistence on conceptualizing capitalism as a permanently contested process, Wood left little indications as to how to integrate the role of *social construction* in the analysis of capitalist transitions. Knafo and Teschke (2017, pp. 20–24) have recently outlined a number of methodological principles to sharpen the perception of creative agency in political Marxism: (a) They stress the importance of clearly *identifying the actors* involved in a process of historical change in order to avoid ascribing social change to causal mechanisms that are directly generated by social structures or objective economic forces. (b) Following the example of the Brenner thesis, they argue for a *deployment of the comparative method* to grasp the meaning that the introduction of an innovation had in its time. Historical comparisons can be *temporal* (diachronic), to mark a qualitative departure from a previous norm, or *spatial* (synchronic), to show how differential courses of action were taken in parallel to address similar concerns. The purpose of the comparative method here is to cast light on the specific qualities of each path of development in order to better isolate the points of (historical) rupture. (c) They insist in the need to *create open-ended theoretical frameworks* that leave sufficient analytical space to account for unintended and counterintuitive outcomes. This arises from an acknowledgement that social actors can never fully control what emerges out of their innovations; something particularly important if we seek not to take for granted the emergence of market imperatives.

Ahead of exploring the Catalan case in greater detail, a synchronic comparison between Galician and Catalan proto-industrial experiences would suggest that despite striking similarities across their manufacturing districts, the latter would execute a successful capitalist breakthrough contingent upon localized social conflicts and accompanied by a change in the consciousness of proto-industrial producers. Three theoretical insights on how to accommodate subjectivity in the formation of market imperatives can be derived from this experience:

- (i) The transformation of market competition into capitalist imperatives depends, in the final analysis, *upon a mutation in the consciousness of market actors*. Neither the pressures to socially reproduce oneself via market exchange (market dependence) nor the emergence of market competition can warrant the appearance of capitalist accumulation, especially in historical periods in which it may have seemed unintuitive to systematically compete by intensifying the process of production. To be sure, the appearance of capitalist production



requires a series of enabling contextual conditions. However, the emergence of a capitalist class depends upon a recognition of the challenges of capitalist competition and upon the capacity and willingness to rise up to them. In the Catalan case, this process is observable and can be clearly historicized.

- (ii) Rather than law-like forces automatically subordinating everything to their orbit, capitalist imperatives should be thought of as *a collective representation of the actions reproducing the pressures to intensify the production process*. Through these lenses, subjectivity assumes a much more pressing role in the process of transition, for it is only through an active socialization of the logic of permanent productive improvement that capitalist dynamics can take hold. As we shall see, in Catalonia, this process is most revolutionary in the changing understandings of proto-industrial production and labour.
- (iii) This process of social construction is bound to be *mediated by successive waves of social and cultural conflict*. Capitalist imperatives are the crystallization of a permanently renegotiated socio-political relation, one that is built upon the layering of past struggles that gradually left their imprint upon economic norms and regulations. This allows us to identify much more clearly the creative agencies driving the appearance and spread of capitalist dynamics. In the case of Catalonia, the spark of capitalist transformation was localized struggles over the subordination of labour that were gradually and unevenly replicated across a number of localities.

### 3 | THE CATALAN TRANSITION TO CAPITALISM

#### 3.1 | An agrarian transition?

*...the only real alternative to the 'classical English' landlord-large tenant-wage labour form of capitalist agriculture seems to have been an equally capitalist system based on large-scale owner-cultivators also generally using wage labour. The latter was the structure which in fact emerged in Catalonia at the end of the fifteenth century out of the previous period of agrarian struggle. (Brenner, 1976, p. 63, emphasis added)*

In the footnotes of his famous 1976 essay, Robert Brenner claimed that Catalonia had experienced an agrarian capitalist transition that ran in parallel with that of England. What caught Brenner's attention was the agrarian class structure that emerged from the peasant revolts of the late 15th century, the *Remença* Wars, which culminated in the abolition of serfdom in the region.<sup>1</sup> For Brenner, the subsequent introduction of freehold leases would have been the source of "a concomitant increase in agricultural productivity" that allowed the region to become "one of the few areas to escape the 'general economic crisis of the seventeenth century', and, like England, to avoid demographic catastrophe while achieving continued economic development" (Brenner, 1976, p. 66). However, Brenner's account soon met the powerful rebuttal of Torras (1980, pp. 255–259), who pointed out that "the signs of the rise which Brenner detects in England at the end of the sixteenth century are nowhere to be found in Catalonia," as it would take at least until the late 17th century for food crises and wild fluctuations in agricultural prices to stabilize. And even then, the agricultural advance of the region would not be spearheaded by English-style engrossed farms but by family farms focused on commercial viticulture that rarely employed waged labour.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Later, Brenner would also compare English and Catalan trajectories in the development of serfdom during the Middle Ages (Brenner, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>For Brenner (1976, p. 63), "the characteristic unit of agricultural ownership and production in sixteenth-century Catalonia, the *Masia*, was typically a very large but compact farm. And this structure did in fact provide the basis for significant and continuing agricultural advance throughout the early modern period." The *masos*, however, were primarily geared towards cereal cultivation and in general displayed a narrower economic universe than the farms focused on commercial viticulture (Oliva Melgar, 1993, p. 92; Congost et al., 1999). They were also not always "large," as their size could vary between 20 and 120 ha (Marfany, 2012, p. 26).



Brenner was right to identify a radical change in the agrarian class structure of Catalonia after the conclusion of the Remença War in 1495, but the change was different to what he assumed. Freehold tenure spread in the form of *emphyteutic* leases, through which peasant families leased lands from their lords in perpetuity. Title holders could pass on their land leases to their offspring, transfer them to third parties, or sublease them to tenants of their own (Marfany, 2012, pp. 26–31). The lords claimed a nominal rent, fixed at the time of lease, and could not evict their tenants unless they failed to cultivate all the land. As time went by, peasant families, by marriage, inheritance, or purchase, began concentrating land leases beyond their capacity to cultivate them. At which point, they began to sublease parts of their estate to sharecroppers of their own in order to keep their family lands. This process of fragmentation was called *eixamenament* (to “swarm” or to “hive off”), and by 1700, most of those families who held the original leases from the lords were no longer cultivating the land themselves; a wealthy class between the landlords and the directly cultivating tenants had emerged.<sup>3</sup> The new middling class of landowners were usually professionals (e.g., lawyers and shopkeepers) with a greater commercial sensibility than their lords, who had their agrarian rents fixed to the terms of a preceding age. This class would seek to profit from the soaring of the price of wines and spirits on the back of the French–Dutch Wars of the late 17th century (Torrás, 1984). Adding clauses to their sharecropping leases, landowners began to force their tenants to cultivate vines, claiming shares of their yield as rent so they could turn them into wines and spirits for export (Moreno 2013). These contracts, known as *rabassa morta* leases, attracted considerable internal migration to the coastal districts, where they were used to extend arable lands into forested areas. This set in motion a train of agrarian specialization that continued into the coming century, giving rise to an export-driven agriculture that had to be supplemented with massive grain imports from the Baltic area, as the peasantry started purchasing their staples on the market (Oliva Melgar, 1988, 1993). From the 1720s, the diffusion of grain supply networks inland can be mapped on to the spread of viticulture. By the 1780s, a regional grain market with synchronized price movements had come into existence (Garrahou, 1970).

In light of this atomized commercial agriculture, it is not surprising that Catalan agrarian historians have long dismissed Brenner's work for reifying the English agrarian experience as the sole benchmark for agrarian economic development (see Garrahou, Planas, & Sagner, 2001b, p. 225). Brenner's work has only recently been reappraised and redeployed for the Catalan case by Julie Marfany, who has reclaimed his notion of market dependence to explain the commercial transformation of the Catalan peasantry in the 18th century, a pattern of development which she identifies as a “transition to agrarian capitalism.” For Marfany, the impulse of the transition came from commercial viticulture because it submerged peasant households in commercial dynamics that, transcending simple forms of “market involvement,” turned the market into a compulsive force in their social reproduction (Marfany, 2012, pp. 5–9, 44–49, 175–178, 183–185).

Through the fragmentariness of sharecropping and its extension of arable lands, *rabassa morta* leases allowed many peasants to access the property ladder, but this process also carried its own contradiction. Access to land was a fundamental requirement for marriage, the expansion of the supply of property facilitated household formation, something of particular importance in a region with strong primogeniture traditions, where the eldest son inherited the whole estate of his father (Marfany, 2012, pp. 93–121). And as sharecropping facilitated access to property to disinherited sons, it also facilitated marriage and procreation. Thus, with the diffusion of *rabassa morta* leases came a 56% increase in population between 1718 and 1787 (Ferrer, 2006, p. 109). As demographic pressure

<sup>3</sup>In the meantime, the Catalan aristocracy had evacuated the countryside to focus on the scramble for public office. The high nobility relocated to Castile, where many of their lines became extinct as they blended with those of the local aristocracy (Molas 2001). The resident nobility became dominated by a lower gentry drafted from an urban patriciate (*ciutadans honrats*) that would perform tax farming functions in Catalonia's self-governing institutions until their abolition after the War of Spanish Succession (after, tax collecting functions would pass on to Castilian-style *corregidores* that were overwhelmingly drafted from the ranks of the Castilian military; Pérez, 2015). By the early decades of the 18th century, the Catalan nobility had become a distinctly urban phenomenon: When the new Bourbon dynasty unveiled a reform that granted life-long offices of local governance to the nobility in 1716, in some areas of the countryside, these positions would have to be filled by doctors or jurists due to a lack of local noblemen (Torrás, 2007, pp. 83, 111–112).

built in this context of impartible inheritance, leases became smaller and shrank beneath subsistence levels, forcing peasant households to complement their incomes with waged labour.<sup>4</sup>

In short, not only did commercial viticulture make peasants market dependent because specialization forced them to purchase their staples; it also made them increasingly reliant on the sale of their labour power. By the turn of the 19th century, there were a vast semi-proletariat and a growing landless proletariat that had fallen off the property ladder altogether (Marfany, 2012, pp. 33–37, 141–143). Agriculture could not absorb this market-dependent population: In a landscape of family farms, only the larger farms would occasionally hire workers for harvests or for the maintenance of buildings (Garrabou, Planas, & Sagner, 2001a, pp. 94–95). Instead, many households turned to the textile industries, where they found greater wages and stable employment. This often meant women and children performing weaving and spinning tasks in peasant households for local clothiers, or migration to Barcelona, where a flourishing cotton industry absorbed a large number of workers from the countryside (Fontana, 1975, p. 73).

Marfany's market dependence thesis bears a lot of resemblance to Brenner's later work on the Netherlands, in which he arguably transcended his initial focus on English-style farms by identifying an agrarian transition in a context of commercial smallholders. Her account reproduces the same problems that Wood identified in Brenner's analysis: Because market dependence is an age-old phenomenon, it remains a highly ambiguous benchmark for specifically capitalist production. This problem is confirmed by an analysis of whether market imperatives existed in Catalan agriculture or not. Upon closer inspection, Catalan agrarian producers remained insulated from the pressures of capitalist competition for at least three reasons:

- (i) *The long-term nature of sharecropping leases insulated cultivators from competitive pressures to renew their access to the means of production.* Traditionally, emphytheutic leases were in perpetuity, something that buffered cultivators from the competitive pressures derived from constant rent inflation. From 1765, there was a gradual increase in contracts with a defined temporal duration (Moreno, 2013). Yet it remained common for a sharecropping lease to span over 40–50 years, something that rendered cultivators fairly insulated from competition to renew their access to the land. In any case, the spread of agreements with a defined duration was an extremely protracted process. In many areas, clauses limiting the duration of leases did not become frequent until the middle of the 19th century. To be sure, this does not mean that sharecropping rendered peasants immune to the vicissitudes of the market: cultivators still bore the risks of a bad harvest, as the costs could render them unable to cultivate the land and open the door to their eviction.<sup>5</sup> However, their insulation from the prospect of constantly rising rents is highly significant, particularly as this pressure was the driver of "improvement" in England.
- (ii) *Sharecropping leases restricted the power of landowners to impose a systematic intensification of the production process "from the outside."* Originally, sharecropping contracts merely stipulated that the vine ought to be cultivated "following the norms and custom of the good peasant," something that tied productive methods to customary norms and eschewed the possibility of productive change. This clause did not completely preclude change, as it condensed unwritten rules that were mutable; however, a change in convention often required an amount of bargaining and conflict that could span over generations (Garrabou et al., 2001a, p. 100). Admittedly, this started to change from the 1760s, when landowners began to engage in localized

<sup>4</sup>The consensus is that 5 or 6 ha was the minimum requirement for self-sufficiency. In some districts, the majority of *rabassa morta* leases averaged around 2 ha, well below subsistence levels. The process of semi-proletarianization was also accelerated by deepening property taxes in the 18th century (Marfany, 2012, pp. 33–41).

<sup>5</sup>Congost (1989) has criticized Catalan historiography for idealizing emphytheusis as an equal partnership in which landowners and cultivators shared costs and benefits. To be sure, this article is in no way trying to fall into the same trap. The class relations of sharecropping are clear: Landowners would passively appropriate a third (although sometimes half) of the harvest without intervening in the production process. What is being argued here is rather that the structures of tenure through which this appropriation took place insulated peasants from the pressures of competitive production.

strategies to bend the juridical nature of their emphytheutic leases in order to turn them into *aparcería* contracts; a similar sharecropping agreement that increased the obligations of tenants. This translated into an erosion of custom accompanied by a gradual increase in specifications regarding how the productive process should be carried out (Moreno, 2013).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the long duration of sharecropping leases continued to slow down the pace of change: Sharecropping arrangements prevented landowners from intervening in the production methods of their tenants once the contracts were in force. To demand changes in the production process, landowners had to wait until the expiry of the contract in order to engrave new clauses into them, rendering them unable to match the fluctuations of the market.

- (iii) In the context of this architecture of tenure, *the limits of the Mediterranean environment discouraged competitive investment in production*. At the time, only vast irrigation systems unaffordable to atomized peasants could bring substantive productive change, and credit for agrarian ventures of this scale seems to have been unavailable (Garrahou et al., 2001a, p. 96).

The market dependence of agrarian producers was perfectly compatible with pre-capitalist production, something that bears important implications for how we understand the causal chain leading up to the appearance of capitalist production: Although the transition could have not occurred were there not a market-dependent workforce in the countryside, this does not mean that the transition happened because there existed a market-dependent rural workforce and certainly not because of agrarian labour. The transition was set in motion elsewhere, driven by agencies that were relatively autonomous from the underlying pressures of rural market dependence.

### 3.2 | The proto-industrial path to capitalism

Brenner's work on Catalonia was inspired by that of Marxist historian Pierre Vilar ([1962] 1992), who in a classic three-volume study ascribed the impetus of the Catalan transition to capitalism in the demographic and agrarian shifts arising from the integration of peasant production into the circuits of a rising Atlantic economy.<sup>7</sup> However, he saw the turning point of this process in "the transformation of commercial capital into industrial capital – the only decisive factor in the birth of a new society in Catalonia and of uneven development at the heart of the Iberian Peninsula"; a topic he reserved for an uncompleted fourth volume to his study (Vilar quoted in Valls, 2006, p. 162).

The task of accommodating the role of industry into the story of the Catalan transition passed on to Vilar's immediate followers, who in the 1970s shifted the locus of capitalist development to the calico-printing manufactures of Barcelona (see Thomson, 1992, pp. 50–89, 230). Focusing on the stamping of colourful designs upon imported cotton and linen yarns, the calico-printing industry developed out of private initiatives between the 1720s and 1740s and reached its zenith in the 1780s. Unlike traditional forms of production, segmented into separate trades, the printing industry was characterized by its bypass of guild structures and its vertical integration of the different stages of the production process (weaving, dyeing, printing, etc.) in relatively large concerns that at their peak could employ between 50 and 185 workers. Vilar's successors identified in these features insurgent capitalist forms, drawing

<sup>6</sup>Although this brought some instances of increased relative surplus extraction (e.g., indications on the use of fertilizer), landowners mostly acquired new capacities to increase the rate of exploitation through distinctively pre-capitalist means. These usually involved (a) an extension of absolute surplus extracted (e.g., by claiming greater shares of the yield or by specifying distances between rows of vines in order to prevent tenants from growing wheat for themselves) or (b) a relapse on "extra-economic" means of exploitation (e.g., tenants were forced to perform periodic labour dues; Marfany, 2012, p. 52; Moreno, 2013). In short, despite changes in the legal structure of agrarian social relations, Catalan agriculture continued to bear a greater resemblance with feudal agrarian practices than with competitive capitalist agriculture.

<sup>7</sup>The perspective underpinning Vilar's monolithic work on Catalonia was inspired by his intervention in the early stages of the transition debate, during the famous dispute between Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy. Although Dobb had argued that feudalism unravelled when market dynamics crept into the countryside, and Sweezy stressed that the impetus of change came from the external shocks of urban-based long-distance trade, Vilar (1956) reformulated the antimony between these "endogenous" and "exogenous" factors as a problem of finding the right synthesis between the two, himself emphasizing the rise of the Atlantic economy. For a discussion of Vilar's intervention in the Dobb–Sweezy debate, see Valls (2006).

continuities with the patterns of industrialization of the 19th century (e.g., Grau & López 1974; Fontana, 1975). Advancing a theory similar to that popularized by Perry Anderson in the English-speaking world ([1974] 2013), Josep Fontana placed Barcelona's manufacturers at the forefront of a "bourgeois revolution." According to Fontana, Spanish absolutism was a social formation held together by a social pact between the imperial aristocracy and a bourgeoisie that exploited the captive markets of the colonies. With the loss of colonial markets in the early 19th century, the bourgeoisie "looked inward to see the [weak] potential for development offered by the national market" and rose up to topple the feudal oligarchies fettering capitalist development within Spain itself (Fontana, 1975, p. 49).<sup>8</sup>

This paradigm faced important challenges during the 1980s, particularly as new lines of research cast doubt on the continuity between Barcelona's manufactures of the 18th century and the region's subsequent pattern of industrial development in the 19th century. It emerged that the trend of vertical integration of the cotton industry was reversed in the 1780s, when the printing manufactures were supplanted by smaller units of production dispersed across the region (Sánchez, 1989, 2000; Thomson, 1992, 2005, 2012).<sup>9</sup> These were instances of "proto-industry": forms of manufacturing reliant upon domestic forms of labour (usually in peasant households, although not only) that were geared towards production for export in extra-regional markets. The intense competition and growth radiating from this sector at the turn of the 19th century has convinced a growing number of historians that the region found its path to capitalism, or at least a bridge into capitalist industrialization, via its proto-industrial experience (Benaul, 1992; Ferrer, 1986; García, 2004; Marfany, 2012; Thomson, 2012).

The study of the Catalan proto-industrial experience was pioneered by none other than Brenner's most staunch critic: Torras (1984, 1989, 1993, 1998, 2007). In his critique of the Brenner thesis, Torras had charged against what he saw as an excessively narrow definition of capitalism that gave rise to a "unilinear and strictly endogenous" account of the transition. Instead, he argued for a broader conception that could encompass the contribution of broader commercial circuits in the emergence of capitalism. Torras' view was that the transition to capitalism in any given social formation does not require the suppression of pre-capitalist forms, but simply their co-option by insurgent capitalist forms (Torras 1980, p. 259).<sup>10</sup> These concerns would resurface in his subsequent embrace of "proto-industrialization," a concept that he believed transcended the sterile dichotomy between "internalist" and "externalist" approaches in the transition debate, as the idea of proto-industry showed how "internal" changes in peasant production were deeply intertwined with "external" commercial factors in the transition to capitalism (Torras, 1989). For Torras, the emergence of textile manufacturing in the Pyrenean foothills, where a steep geography made agricultural subsistence more difficult, should be seen as a process of specialization complementary to the rise of commercial viticulture along the coast (Torras, 1984).

Torras' insistence in "broadening" of the transition arises from a refusal to ascribe causal primacy to any particular factor. This approach invites us instead to focus on the structural context that made the transition possible to begin with. The problem with this holistic view is that it blurs critical junctures into the conjuncture: It dissolves the crucial turning points that bent history in a particular direction into the background, desensitizing us from the agencies and

<sup>8</sup>Fontana's intervention bears the unmistakable marks of what Brenner dismissed as the "commercialization model." In representing the emergence of capitalism as the unfettering of market from its feudal shackles, it presumes that capitalist social relations were simply dormant and waiting to be unleashed.

<sup>9</sup>This was accompanied by a general decline in Marxist historiography that replaced the question of the origins of capitalism for the origins of industrialization, a turn that emphasized the causal primacy of technical developments rather than a shift in the mode of production. For a brief discussion, see Thomson (1992, pp. 4–7).

<sup>10</sup>In this sense, Torras' vision of capitalism shares parallels with Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory: any institution contaminated by capitalist accumulation, broadly defined as profit-making via market exchange, becomes capitalist by extension. Specifically referring to agriculture, elsewhere in his early work, he would argue that "the objective of capital is not so much the alteration of productive forms, but the capture of rents and agrarian profits to include them in the sphere of circulation" (Torras, 1976, p. 27). Torras' conception of capitalism is thus diametrically opposite to that being put forward in this paper, which seeks to narrow down its definition to a historically specific dynamic: self-sustaining competitive improvement in production. The narrative of the transition is thus bound to be different: whereas Torras seeks to broaden the story to encompass changes in market exchange at large, this paper seeks to focus on the agencies that made happen a qualitatively new form of production.

contingencies that make up the historical process. A similar criticism could be raised against Marfany's (2012) account: In tracing the origin of Catalonia's proto-industrial transition to the market dependence of the region's peasantry (pp. 55–92, 175–178), she delivers a narrative of the transition that carries an excessive focus on contextual factors.

To be sure, there is no doubt that Catalan capitalism emerged in the context of a broader trading system and that it could have not done so without it. Indeed, the take-off of the textile industry across the region would be unintelligible without the rise of commercial viticulture: Crucial inputs such as ready spun yarn or raw cotton were the returns of *eau-de-vie* and wine exports (Valls, 2003, pp. 27–34). To this, we should add the abolition of customs between the realms of Aragon and Castile in 1714, a political development that gave Catalan producers access to the Madrid market, where the bulk of their proto-industrial output was sold in the 18th century (Torras, 2007, pp. 103–121).<sup>11</sup> However, equally true is that capitalism did not emerge because of this commercial context. Viticulture stimulated textile manufacturing in other regions of Spain, such as Andalusia, where vines were cultivated in much vaster extensions to produce wines of a higher added value. Yet this region only saw the emergence of a handful of cotton manufactures and a pocket of rural industry in the foothills of Málaga that decayed at the turn of the 19th century (Benaül, 2003). The proto-industrial centre in Béjar (Salamanca) counted with units of production capable of higher output and was exempt from the 8% sales tax that Catalan producers faced in the Madrid market. Yet, despite such notable competitive advantage, they were outpaced by the Catalans all the same (Ros, 1999).<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, the Catalan proto-industrial sector did have an *a priori* structural advantage: its *compactness*, a cluster formation that facilitated the emergence of an elastic labour market with industry-specific skills and the diffusion of technological advances by word of mouth (Torras, 1998, p. 87). However, even then, the capacity to unlock this structural potential would hinge upon a prior erosion of the guild system and upon a revolution in economic attitudes.

### 3.3 | Sociocultural struggle and capitalist breakthrough

In the 17th century, as the influx of precious metals from the Americas inflated production costs, many textile guilds from Barcelona relocated to the countryside and focused on the production of woollens for rural markets (Torras, 2007, p. 49; Thomson, 1992, pp. 34–49). The industry flourished in the central highlands of Catalonia, where producers navigated the long crisis of the 17th century via a process of hierarchical differentiation (Benaül, 1992, pp. 32–62). The clothiers (*paraires*), the section of the guild in charge of finishing the textiles and of organizing the whole production process, pushed for the relaxation of corporative regulations in order to centralize production and cut costs at the expense of the weavers' wages and employment.<sup>13</sup> These efforts had uneven geographical results. In the steep areas of the north, rural industry remained confined to its traditional role of producing for local consumption. The middle areas experienced considerable growth and became regional suppliers, some of which eventually moved on to produce medium quality cloths that were marketed outside of Catalonia. But in the Southern areas of rural manufacturing, by the mid-18th century, a string of interconnected towns had formed a dense cluster of proto-industry where higher quality cloths were produced for extra-regional export, the vast majority to the Madrid market. To achieve this, the first stages of production (weaving and spinning) were “put out” to nearby

<sup>11</sup>The victory of Bourbon dynasty in the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1715) dissolved the confederal foundations of the Habsburg monarchy into a unitary state apparatus inspired in the French. The Crown of Aragon, an autonomous realm that extended across the eastern seaboard of Iberia and of which Catalonia was a part of, was assimilated into the legal, administrative, and fiscal structures of Castile; a restructuring of the Spanish polity that included the abolition of the “dry ports” that had previously separated Aragon and Castile (Thomson, 2005, p. 703).

<sup>12</sup>Béjar underwent a process of transformation similar to that of Terrassa in the first decades of the 18th century. However, as Ros (1999) explains, a “guild reaction” from 1765 eschewed these advances.

<sup>13</sup>Unlike other areas of proto-industry, where merchants employed guild workers to commercialize their output (*Verlagssystem*), in Catalonia, the role of commercializing the product through an extensive network of shops (*botigues*) fell onto the clothiers themselves, giving rise to a growing entrepreneurial mentality within the guilds (*Kaufsystem*; Benaül, 1992).

peasant households, and the resulting yarns were then processed (cutting, dyeing, etc.) in workshops by specialists. This last zone would be the incubator of capitalist relations of production.

The capitalist transformation of this proto-industrial sector was contingent upon the success of the clothier class in their assault on medieval structures of production. Dissolving the politically constituted institutions that regulated surplus extraction at the expense of competition, in a number of localities across the region, the clothiers would attempt to subordinate the production process to their command in order to restyle the textile industry along competitive lines. Driving this process was an explicit desire to increase their responsiveness to market signals, as they realized that their success depended on their capacity to mount a flexible response to changing fashions in consumer markets (Benaul, 1992, pp. 40–44; Torras, 2007, pp. 147–157).

It appears that these strategies were first successful in the town of Terrassa (Benaul, 1992, pp. 40–42). Military occupation during the War of Spanish Succession plunged the Catalan textile sector into crisis, and in the midst of chaos, corporative regulations unravelled: Production evaded quality controls, and weavers were drafted outside of the guilds. With the arrival of peace, the guild order was re-established in different local settlements. However, the woollens guild of Terrassa emerged out of this process with a radical twist: The new ordinances of 1724 excluded the weavers from the corporation and blasted them into an unregulated labour market. Clothiers kept some guild coverage for themselves to restrict further access into the trade and avoid competition, but by 1742, the salaries of weavers were no longer fixed and fluctuated across firms within the same town. This allowed weaving (and later spinning) practices to be outsourced to peasant households in putting-out networks, the radius of which quickly expanded to the nearby hills and towns. Clothiers also began to break out of the local monopolies by “importing” skilled specialists from outside of the town, determining their obligations without legal constraint.

Terrassa's revolutionary turn did not go unnoticed. The clothiers of nearby towns quickly manoeuvred to replicate its model by different means. In Igualada, a proto-industrial town on the road to Madrid, wool clothiers spoke of the “exalted” firms of Terrassa as a source of inspiration, remarking that they bypassed the authority of master weavers by putting “youths [directly] at the disposal of the manufacturer, achieving like this their famous reputation” (quoted in Torras, 1993). Here, they would resort to wearing down their own woollens guild through legal battles and by mobilizing their influence in local government (Torras, 1993; Benaul, 1992, p. 45). By the 1750s, corporative regulations were no longer being enforced, and journeymen were employed circumventing traditional labour regulations. In the town of Manresa, the transformation occurred in the silk industry rather than in that of woollens (Ferrer, 1986, pp. 20–25). Here, wealthy clothiers captured guild institutions and made use of their regulations to dispossess and subordinate fellow artisans. With the pretext of quality control infractions, they started imposing heavy disciplinary fines on hired guild masters, confiscating their raw materials and forcing them to a condition of financial dependence. Within a few decades, the number of independent artisans sharply declined: In 1746, the number of craftsmen owning their means of production amounted to 53.8% of the local workforce. By 1765, this figure had halved to 25.4%, and by 1788, it had gone down to a mere 11.7%.

Yet capitalist production did not spontaneously emerge from the erosion of corporative regulations; it was actively crafted. The struggle over proto-industrial social property relations was simultaneously a process of social construction that shaped a new understanding of production and labour. We see this normativity in the ways in which the clothiers legitimized their unorthodox practices by comparing themselves to the prestigious managers of the realm's Colbert-style manufactures. In the midst of legal battles with the weavers in 1762, a group of clothiers from Igualada who openly styled themselves as “manufacturers” (*fabricants*) made the following case (quoted in Marfany, 2012, p. 75)<sup>14</sup>:

*In all the factories of the kingdom ... there is a director, who rules, governs and orders everything necessary for the factory ... Without any interference in the running of these concerns from any dependent individuals within them, such as the weavers, and what a Director is to the royal factories, so is a*

<sup>14</sup>The clothiers of Sabadell raised similar arguments, citing the example of Barcelona's cotton manufactures, where “owners rule absolutely and do not depend in any way from the weavers or the other employees” (Benaul, 1992, p. 45).



*manufacturer in his own manufacturing concern, since he takes an interest in the quality of the cloths in order to sell them well afterwards, and obtains the necessary credit without which no enterprise can survive.*

The weavers' response is an attestation of just how contested these new ideas were:

*The clothiers who style themselves manufacturers are no such thing, rather, they practice one of the four crafts involved in the manufacture of a cloth [apart from weaving] these are the clothier, dyer and cropper ... and although it would be more fitting to describe the weaver as a cloth manufacturer than the clothier, there is no reason for one to dominate the other, and raise himself up to be a master, for each is only master of the work that falls to him.*

The spread of capitalist development across the region hinged upon the outcome and sequence of these sociocultural struggles of this sort. In the town of Sabadell, in the vicinity of Terrassa, the advance of capitalist production was temporarily stalled by the balance of forces. The weavers succeeded in resisting the assault of the clothiers in the 1760s, who lamented being “deprived of the choice to have their cloth manufactured by the workers they deemed most skillful” (Benaül, 1992, p. 45). However, a renewed cycle of struggle in the latter decades of the century tipped the balance in their favour, and the power of guilds was gradually chipped away, resulting in production doubling in size. By contrast, attempts to emulate Terrassa's practices would altogether fail in the towns of Esparreguera and Olesa, resulting in the eventual subsumption of their peasant weavers under Terrassa's putting-out orbit (Benaül, 1992, 40–42).

At first, Barcelona witnessed an alternative passage out of medieval industry in this period. As early as 1721—even before Terrassa's turn—the wool clothiers of the city had tried and failed in their attempt to centralize production and subordinate weavers into commodified workers (Molas, 1970, p. 386). Instead, the city would see the development of a powerful calico-printing cotton industry out of private initiatives to emulate the realm's “royal manufactures.” As Thomson (2012, p. 318) has argued, rather than a reflection of their own internal dynamism, the organizational form of Barcelona's manufactures (relatively large size, vertical integration, and side-lining of guilds) arose out of attempts to align themselves with the dominant trends in absolutist political economy in order to tap into political favour (e.g., tailored tariffs, monopolistic privileges, and so forth).<sup>15</sup> But these protected firms would come to feel the pressures of competition in labour, yarn, and cloth markets radiating from smaller proto-industrial competitors. With the influx of raw cotton from the United States from the mid-1770s, a large number of “unregulated” spinning and printing workshops proliferated in Barcelona, manufacturing high-quality cheap cotton textiles outside of the corporatist shell of the large printers (Thomson, 1992, p. 185). The large printers also came up against the adoption of cotton manufacturing by a number of centres in the countryside. An industrial survey in 1784 reported the use of American cotton in the towns of Reus, Capellades, Igualada, Manresa, Olot, Mataró, Agramunt, and Seu d'Urgell (Thomson, 2005, p. 722).

The diffusion of capitalist production was facilitated by changes in the economic attitudes of state officials from the 1760s. During the reign of Charles III (1759–1788), Spanish mercantilism acquired a “liberal” bent that took inspiration from British commercial policy and physiocratic theories (Thomson, 2005, pp. 716–718). At the same time, Catalonia's *Junta de Comercio*, the regional chamber of commerce, became increasingly favourable towards the practices of the proto-industrial sector given their commercial success. The changing mentalities of policymakers had a direct impact on textile production. The royal ordinances of 1769 allowed firms across the region to concentrate all stages in the production process and to hire as many weavers as they pleased, “choosing them at their

<sup>15</sup>The calico industry emerged in the age of Philip V (1700–1746), a period marked by Colbertian policies of infant-industry protection and the founding of massive state manufactures for import-substitution purposes (Thomson, 2005, pp. 703–716). Although Barcelona's calico industry was left to the private sector (no cotton manufactures were ever founded by the state), private investment always depended on remarkable opportunities for import substitution. With exception of a short-lived “liberal” turn in the 1760s, the imports of foreign cotton cloth and printed calicoes were always banned in the realm. The bulk of their sales were geared at the heavily protected Spanish market and supplemented by exports to the captive colonial markets (Oliva Melgar, 1988, 1993).



discretion and commanding them at will" (Torras, 2007, p. 147; Molas, 1970, p. 388). Between 1778 and 1789, a series of decrees eroded the power of the guilds, allowing textile producers of all fibres to vary cloth types and alter production processes (Thomson, 2005, p. 709). In 1789, the *Junta de Comercio* declared the freedom of enterprise in the city's textile industry while charging against "the damage and inconveniences that guild ordinances cause to the progress of the arts and crafts" (Moreno, 2015, p. 65). That being said, it remains extremely noteworthy that the clothiers of Terrassa, Igualada, and Manresa did not wait for the enactment of these regulations to revolutionize their production processes.

The interventions of the *Junta* would also be decisive in consolidating the advance of proto-industrialization and in securing the transmission of capitalist pressures. When the large printers of Barcelona came up against the dynamism of smaller competitors in the 1780s, the potentates of the sector pooled their resources into the Royal Spinning Company of Barcelona and demanded the monopoly over cotton spinning in the city; a distinctly pre-capitalist strategy that would have insulated them from competition. However, the *Junta* rejected the proposal worried that this measure would strangle the dynamism of proto-industrial producers. In response, between 1784 and 1785, the Spinning Company turned its cotton-spinning operations outward and attempted to tap into rural putting-out networks for cheap skilled labour (García, 2004, pp. 57–146). This strategy soon backfired: The Company's intervention in the countryside served to spread cotton-manufacturing skills among the capitalists of the hinterland, who quickly adopted the new fibre and began carving out their market share. This was the case in Igualada, where the local clothiers switched from wool to cotton and quickly outcompeted Barcelona's printers out of the town (Marfany, 2012, pp. 76–79). Without politically constituted privileges, the manufactures of Barcelona were soon overtaken by their smaller proto-industrial competitors. After some time of attempting to take their putting-out operations elsewhere in the countryside, the dominance of the large printers in cotton manufacturing was liquidated between 1785 and 1790.

The centre of gravity of the Catalan textile industry shifted to the countryside; "cotton manufacturing ceased to be fundamentally Barcelonese and became Catalan" (Sánchez, 1989, p. 99). The supersession of the calico-printing manufactures by proto-industrial units of production was accompanied by clear symptoms of capitalist development (Thomson, 1992, p. 269; 2005, p. 725). Rapid industrial expansion saturated the market and prompted the first crisis of overproduction between 1786 and 1789. After a sharp contraction of demand, production rebounded with vigour: The levels of cotton import of 1785 were matched again in 1789, and their total doubled only 1 year later.

Expansion continued until 1792, when the advent of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) and the independence of the Latin American colonies (1810–1833) plunged the country into a long depression that rolled back the industrial advances of the 18th century in most regions. However, Catalonia's proto-industrial sector would successfully weather the crisis and overtake the role of other regions in the provision of the domestic market. It is highly remarkable that this process occurred without the effective aid of protective tariffs: Though the state continued to officially pursue a protectionist policy, the contraband of foreign imports was rife on the ground. Even as English textiles flooded the market, Catalan firms managed to resist the onslaught and secure 34% of share in the Spanish cotton cloth market between 1792 and 1827 (Thomson, 2003, p. 302). Rather than divesting in the face of retreating market opportunities, the proto-industrial firms of Catalonia poised themselves strategically to face the conjuncture. After switching to cotton, the manufacturers of Manresa opted for intensifying production and introduced water-powered technology with great success: By 1830, out of the 40 concerns using water-power in the region, 11 were located in Manresa alone (Ferrer, 1986, p. 382; Thomson, 1992, p. 302). Manresa was the centre of the broader Bages district, an industrious area, which in this period came to outstrip Barcelona itself. By contrast, the centres of Sabadell and Terrassa opted for deepening their specialization in wool and upgrading the quality of their product (Benaül, 1992). In stark contrast, the remainder of Barcelona's printing manufactures were obliterated by the crisis, reducing the city's textile industry to an underlying layer of small workshops; the "discontinuity with the eighteenth century calico-printing industry was nearly total" (Thomson, 1992, pp. 294–301).

The resurgence of Barcelona would come with the arrival of steam power in 1833, only then would the city's textile workforce recover the numbers of the 1790s (Thomson, 2012, pp. 322, 328). The new technology required large sums of fixed capital investment and the import of coal by sea, making industry flock around Barcelona's old merchant families for the provision of finance and inputs. Production became fully mechanized and concentrated in large steam mills that exploited economies of scale, crushing the preceding wave of proto-industrial capitalism by the 1850s. However, even then, the transformation of Barcelona into the "factory of Spain" would owe much to the effervescence of its proto-industrial hinterlands. The new factory proletariat drafted its armies from the ranks of proto-industrial skilled workers accustomed to working outside of the guild system, and many of the proto-industrial manufacturers put out of business assumed managerial roles in the new factories (Marfany, 2012, pp. 82–83; García, 2004, pp. 331–337).

## 4 | CONCLUSION

As Wood pointed out in the midst of her dispute with Brenner over the Dutch transition, the pressures forcing social actors to engage in market exchange to fulfil their social reproduction (market dependence) cannot explain the emergence of drives to permanently improve the productivity of labour when producing for the market (capitalist imperatives). Catalan sharecroppers were blasted onto the market by a combination of impartible inheritance and the progressive fragmentation of land leases. However, the architecture of tenure insulated their commercial agriculture from competition and prevented capitalist imperative to take hold. The situation was different in the textile proto-industry where many of these semi-proletarianized households sold their labour power to complement their incomes; however, again, it would not be the market dependence of these labourers that determined the passage into capitalist production. This breakthrough would be contingent on the outcome of sociocultural struggles to subordinate production and labour to the vicissitudes of competition. The mutation of Catalan proto-industry on the back of these conflicts displays the features of capitalist production outlined by Wood. These firms broke out of corporatist regulations and carved out their position in the Madrid market without the protection of politically constituted privileges; if anything, they were operating against the grain, as rival regions (e.g., Béjar) did enjoy fiscal privileges in the same market. Rather than making profits in circulation (the age-old practice of buying cheap and selling dear), or relying upon politically constituted means to corner their markets (ensuring their profits in advance), Catalan proto-industry derived its prowess from competitive production practices.

Yet it would be insufficient to finish with a mere reassertion of Wood's insistence on the "separation of the economic and the political." The erosion of politically constituted means of surplus extraction (i.e., the local monopolies of the guild system) and the commodification of labour allowed capitalist entrepreneurs to qualitatively transform age-old systems of production, but this did not preclude the outcome of this mutation. In Barcelona, the erosion of the guild system culminated in an alternative passage out of feudal industry: the calico-printing manufactures. Catalonia's proto-industrial road to capitalism was cemented by a process of social construction that actively crafted a new culture of production and labour based on the principles of competition. The significance of this change in economic rationalities can be seen at the turn of the 19th century, when a long economic crisis struck. In a move typical of pre-capitalist producers, investors fled the absolutist manufactures of Barcelona, obliterating the city's textile industry at the lack of market opportunities. By contrast, proto-industrial firms pushed against the current and faced the conjuncture with intensifying strategies that allowed them to secure a significant share of the market against the onslaught of English competition, even in the absence of effective protectionist measures.

To be sure, the claim here is not that capitalism emerged out of the will of a handful of entrepreneurs. The Catalan transition to capitalism could not have happened if it were not for the prior development of a commercial agriculture; nor could it have emerged if the circuits of commercial viticulture had not given the region access to

crucial textile inputs. The circumstances of the capitalist breakthrough were shaped by long-term developments and contextual pre-conditions that laid out a structural context without which capitalist change could have not occurred. However, the dilemma cannot be to draw an equivalence between the broader conjuncture and the specific critical juncture when establishing out the causal determinants of the transition, as structural pre-conditions did not ensure the eventual success of Catalan proto-industry. In the final analysis, the weight of such a historical shift fell on the shoulders of everyday people, making their own history, even if not under conditions of their own making.

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